

Bo Gritz: The Glory & The Search

'Our Job Is Simple—To Liberate U.S. POWs from Asia ASAP'

By Art Harris

"Under the law, we will be armed terrorists," Bo Gritz was telling his men. "But because none of us are in uniform, it lets the U.S. government off the hook."

"If we get caught they can say, 'We couldn't control those crazy bastards. If we self-immolate, they can say, 'They were just a bunch of crazies who never got over the war.'"

"But if we bring back just one live American POW, he becomes the ante for the biggest poker game this nation will ever play in this decade."

HE IS A HIGHLY decorated Vietnam war hero, a muscled six-footer with curly blond hair, hard blue eyes, a black belt in karate and very little self doubt. An ex-Green Beret officer who scorns "faint hearts" in the Pentagon and "potbellied" bureaucrats, James Gordon (Bo) Gritz (rhymes with "sights") is the new point man for Right Wing Romance.

Surely, God and Buddha are on his side, even as he sits in jail half a world away, a soldier of fortune under arrest in Thailand for launching his own commando raid into Laos to rescue American prisoners he believes are still being held a decade after a war as controversial as his exploits.

It is a modern day holy grail that Gritz, 44, has chased for four years, issuing press releases from the jungle on his "covert" mission, fueling heroic fantasies and, most recently, hustling cash from movie stars like Clint Eastwood and high tech communications gear from companies like Litton, all the while pitching for handouts from families of a few of about 2,500 soldiers still unaccounted for a decade after the last prisoners came home from Vietnam.

Actor William Shatner said on Johnny Carson's show that he purchased Gritz's life story—"a modern-day Sgt. York"—for \$10,000. And in a curious Hollywood twist, Eastwood anted up \$30,000, and phoned President Reagan last year to say that Gritz

was planning a raid into Laos to hunt POWs. He lobbied his fellow actor for government help.

And why not? Bo Gritz is Made for TV. If ever there were a war of nobility full of macho-Zen overtones for men like Gritz, this is it, a middle-aged man going back to Nam to slash through the jungle and bring 'em back alive. Gritz calls his POW-hunters "the over the hill gang."

"There's no question about his skills as a soldier," says William P. Yarborough, 71, a retired army general who commanded the Green Berets at Fort Bragg during Vietnam. "But his former incarnation as a Green Beret has gotten him a little out of phase with reality. I just hope they don't hold it against the breed because one guy caught his foot in a trap."

First you have to find the POWs, if any are alive years later, perhaps skin and bones and near psychotic wondering why America forgot. A straitjacket was on Gritz's supply list—in case any POW freaked out behind the lines.

Gritz argues that POWs are being held as "bargaining chips" for war reparations that never came—the North Vietnamese government says it is owed \$3 billion promised by President Nixon.

"It's easy to see their logic," he says. "Anyone captured in Cambodia or Laos were not technically POWs, so they are not obligated to be returned or recognized. Our job is simple—to liberate U.S. POWs from Asia ASAP. Why? Because we want them back, so we can begin negotiations for the others."

What others? Although some 480 live sightings have been claimed by refugees since 1975, Pentagon officials cannot confirm them. And what would Vietnam, or an impoverished nation like Laos, have to gain by keeping them for so long? America still has B-52s and a president who pledges to get them out if any can be found.

Gritz once had access to top secret Pentagon data, leaked to him via the National League of POW-MIA Families with sympathetic intelligence access. But that was before the League withdrew its support from Gritz.

Says Ann Griffiths, executive director of the League: "Someone doing a covert operation doesn't send out press releases from the jungles of Laos." Such "misguided" missions endanger the lives of any Americans who may still be there, she adds.

After learning of that 1981 data, Gritz described spy satellite photos of shadows that analysts believed to be those of Caucasians. They were taller than locals. Also: a curious inscription on the ground, possibly made by logs or bodies, that read, "B-52."

To Gritz, it was a cry for help; military intelligence analysts were more cautious. Imagine a U.S. raid rescuing Russian advisers, who also cast long shadows. CIA-backed Laotian mercenaries checked out the site and found no evidence of Americans, U.S. intelligence sources said.

This week, in jail in Nakhom Phanom, Thailand, after his most recent failed mission, Gritz claimed in a radio interview that he knew of 10 Americans still alive across the Mekong River in Laos, but offered no proof after he surrendered Monday to Thai authorities. He was charged with possessing an unlicensed radio transmitter.

Two associates similarly charged were released on bail—one of them Lynn Standerwick, 25, the daughter of an Air Force pilot who ejected from his F-4 Phantom over Laos in 1971. Gritz wears a bracelet bearing his name.

One account had Gritz returning with a coded questionnaire filled out by a purported live American POW. So far, Gritz isn't saying.

It was the latest chapter in the saga of a four-tour combat veteran, fluent in Chinese and Swahili, who ran one of the first mobile guerrilla task forces behind enemy lines in Vietnam, an "Apocalypse Now"-like adventure he never forgot. Gritz led what he calls his 250 loyal "bodes," or Cambodian mercenaries, against the VC.

He counts 60 medals, including Silver and Bronze Stars whose award citations read like after-action reports about John Wayne. He cashed out of the Army as a lieutenant colonel in 1979 after commanding the Special Forces in Panama and took a job in overseas operations with Hughes Aircraft in Los Angeles—a government-arranged civilian "cover" for his POW search, he claims.

(Hughes denies it backed a covert operative. "To my knowledge, what he did was on his own," said a company spokesman.)

Despite his reservations, Yarborough says: "He has been in some of the tightest places a man can be and survive. If I were in combat, I'd love to have this guy with me. He has a lot of leadership and charisma."

But says Tom Smith, 41, a Nevada solar energy entrepreneur and decorated ex-Green Beret who trained with Gritz in Florida in 1981: "I wouldn't cross the street with the guy. He's the dupe of his own ego disorders. He's suffering from the early stages of 'burning bush complex.' He believes God is going to come down and show him the way. He's totally dangerous."

Still, war stories fuel the Gritz mystique, not all of them from the barroom.

In his Vietnam memoirs, "A Soldier Reports," Gen. William C. Westmoreland features Gritz as "a daring young commander," detailing one "mission impossible" he was assigned: to track down a crashed U.S. spy plane gobbled up in triple canopy jungle along the Cambodian border.

According to Westmoreland's account, Washington was desperate to retrieve the "black box" containing top secret codes. It had failed to self-destruct. If it got into VC hands, Moscow might be the next stop.

But no one knew exactly where the plane was. Choppers dropped off Gritz and his "bodes." They hacked their way through "wait-a-minute" vines, snaking along elephant trails.

On the fourth day out, around Christmas 1966, they stumbled on the U-2 wreckage. The black box was gone. Gritz needed a prisoner to tell him where the box was. He set up an

ambush. Kill every man, except the first two, he ordered. Gritz and another sergeant would take care of them hand-to-hand with "zappers," or CIA-issue spring steel billy clubs.

A VC patrol came into view and the men raked it with automatic weapons and claymore mines. Gritz jumped from the bush and hit his quarry too hard. He died. (One defiant prisoner had to be shot, Gritz said later.) Gritz went to work on a wounded VC recruit.

"You're going to die unless we treat you and we're short on medicine," said Gritz, by his own account, holding up a mirror to show the prisoner a piece of grenade in his scalp. "Where did they take the equipment from the plane?"

And off they marched. Gritz recalls hooking a detonation cord to a powerful plastic explosive attached to the prisoner's neck, marching him off like a dog on a leash. At dusk, his strike force shot its way into the VC camp, snatched the black box and retreated through the jungle.

Gritz's guerrilla operation raided 53 VC base camps in 60 days and lost only one man. "We came out of the jungle feeling like Daniel Boone," he says. "War is like a giant Parker game, only the Big Guy in the sky is rolling the dice."

Others say Gritz tends to exaggerate military heroics. On pitches to fund his MIA quest, he conjures tears and dollars by telling a story about one Sgt. George Hoagland, a badly wounded comrade Gritz says committed suicide so he and fellow Green Berets would abandon him and escape a VC ambush.

"Hoagland put his AR-15 to his head and before any of us could react, pulled the trigger, eliminating the need for us to be there," says Gritz.

"Gritz wasn't even on that god-damn team," says Chuck Hiner, 47, one of two survivors. "I was with George when he died. He just got blown away, must have taken 150 rounds."

Over the last three years, Gritz has trained would-be American samurai everywhere from the bayous of Florida to California in operations full of bravado, intrigue and slapstick.

All told, he has launched three "missions" that have fizzled, along the way consulting psychics, Hollywood hypnotists and the I Ching, losing two guerrillas in firefights with Pathet Lao forces and sowing dismay from the Pentagon to the White House.

On Operation Velvet Hammer, an earlier training mission in Florida which Gritz invited a reporter to watch, 21 combat veterans used the American Cheerleading Academy in Leesburg, Fla., to get in shape for a rescue attempt in Laos. It fell apart in March 1981 for lack of funds and mutiny in the ranks.

Volunteers included security guards, computer analysts, teachers, truck drivers, vegetarians and beef eaters, all combat tested, who left wives, children and jobs to follow Gritz back into holy war, a few hell bent on vengeance.

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Among them was Terry Smith, an ex-Chicago fireman and ex-Green Beret. He volunteered to tuck any POW beneath 17-inch biceps (etched with dragon and skull) and carry him out alive. A striving college football player at 32, he quit spring training and delayed his dream of going pro to go with Gritz.

"I gave up something I've always wanted, but there were at least a dozen Green Berets on operations in that area in Laos who never got out," he said. "When I shoot the first commie, I'm gonna have an orgasm. I'm gonna come out with a POW or die trying. I figure we'll either go down in history, or start World War III."

Vengeance amid the orange groves, indeed.

"I seen a platoon of NVA [North Vietnamese] soldiers stop a pregnant woman and cut her up," recalled Terry Smith of his days in Vietnam. "I wanted to rip their heads off but I couldn't do nothing about it."

After the war, Gritz, too, discovered "a vicious hate for the bastards. I wanted to get back and waste some more. On this mission, I'm not going to be kind. We are here and they are there and anyone who gets in our way is going to get walked on."

They were high on just the idea, adrenalin and the "Ballad of the Green Berets" blaring over the loudspeaker at all of them: an ex-Special Forces sergeant still embittered about losing his son in Vietnam, Terry Smith humping a rucksack, urging the flabbies on—"Suck that clean Florida air!"

And always Gritz—Big Daddy, cool, confident, a gentle killer with Tae Kwon Do feet who had "seen the bear and heard the hoot owl," as he liked to say. Many hadn't felt this good since Southeast Asia.

Gritz was going to take them back. Fly in like tourists. Rent a safe house near the Mekong River. Contact Gritz's agent handler working with friendly guerrillas on the other side. Pick up automatic weapons smuggled in through an undisclosed arms dealer. Load up on gold in case of capture and print up "get out of jail free cards" in several languages: IOUs redeemable for \$1,000 at the nearest U.S. embassy, until, presumably, the finder tried it.

The cover was to be a rice giveaway tent among Cambodian refugees, dogooder Americans with lots of free lunch. Once they sneaked over to Laos and made the snatch—photos by cameras with long lenses were the next best thing—they would radio back to the rice tent. Word would be passed to Washington and the president would be given the chance to send in choppers and air support from the 7th Fleet.

If the president said no, Gritz would come back overland with his quarry, hoping pals from the American embassy in Bangkok would swoop down in a "borrowed" Thai police helicopter. One live American POW, c.o.d. Mr. Ambassador. Only it didn't work out like in the movies.

They never left Florida. When funds fell short, someone suggested driving down to Miami to waste a few cocaine dealers packing wads of \$100 bills. "Whatever it takes to do it," said Terry Smith. "So if I got to kill 20 American bad guys to get 100 POWs out of Vietnam, I'll do it."

Gritz and a few loyalists regrouped later that year to hunt clues in Thailand. But most were embittered.

Things went little better on last November's Hollywood-backed "Operation Lazarus" in Laos, which featured one commando known as "Dr. Death." Another Gritz guerrilla, Dominic Zappone, a Texas construction worker, was captured and ransomed by Lao guerrillas and two of his native troops were killed, according to published accounts.

Gritz came home, then flew back to Thailand in December, and rented a \$1,000/month safe house in Nakhom Phanom, 450 miles from Bangkok, near the Mekong River. He sent a letter to the Los Angeles Times, claiming that the CIA was aware of his plans. The agency denied it.

Vincent Arnone, 36, a Mauldin, Mass., private detective and ex-Green Beret, was among those who went along.

"It was one of the weirdest doggone things I've ever experienced," he said in an interview. "It was like looking right across the Potomac and seeing kids playing and soldiers drilling—and they were communists. The enemy! We were so near yet so far away."

Last month, Gritz crossed the Mekong again, said Arnone. "Bo was convinced the government wasn't going to do anything, so he would."

After Thai police arrested two of Gritz's associates for possessing the radio transmitter, Gritz turned himself in, saying only that he had been "on a long walk."

The long walk began on his grandparents' chicken farm in Enid, Okla., where Gritz, an only son, waited for a father who never came home from the "right" war. A pilot in World War II, the elder Gritz flew B-17s. He was shot down over France Nov. 14, 1944. Bo was five.

He yearned to be a soldier, seeking escape from the windswept wheat fields. A self-styled juvenile prankster, Gritz stole motorcycles, tossed firecrackers in the auditorium, "anything you can think of that was rotten."

He built a hot rod, ran with gangs. "We were right out of 'American Graffiti,'" he said. "I saw myself as a tough guy."

After he was expelled from high school, off he went to Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia. He turned down an appointment to West Point, and one day, in 1957, spied a poster of a Green Beret soldier on the wall of an Army recruiter.

"What do they do?" he asked.

"They go out into the woods, live off bark and lizards, snoop around, blow up bridges and garrote people," said the recruiter.

"That's for me," said Gritz. He got in on the ground floor in an era when the Green Berets were coming of age. President John F. Kennedy targeted Special Forces' anti-guerrilla missions for use as diplomatic tools in dealing with communist "wars of liberation."

The green beret symbolized their special skills.

By then—even with no college degree—Gritz was an officer, trained to jump out of a plane at 20,000 feet, free fall almost four miles, pop open his chute 700 feet above the ground and land on a dime.

"Until you have almost lost your life, you don't know how to appreciate it," he once reflected. "By virtue of our missions, we walk the periphery of life. It's not so much what does happen to you, but what can happen to you. Sure, we'd come back from the jungle and shoot up the bars and ride the whores to the beach in our choppers, even swing them up and down the beach on ropes."

"We enjoy life. We're able to taste the sweetness of the grape because we've seen how perilous life can be."

After Vietnam, Gritz took leave, sent his wife to Hawaii and retired alone to the mountains of Mexico, a seeker on the path of the Zen of Violence, to meditate and practice karate. "I had to come to grips with the question, 'Do I have to relive my life or somehow make up for all the destruction in Vietnam?' The answer I came away with was that as long as it's not done selfishly, as long as there's no personal gain involved, killing is justifiable. I didn't kill for selfish reasons; it was my job as a soldier."

He gave up hunting. "I don't shoot anything that can't shoot back. I wouldn't take anybody's life if I didn't have to."

Combat is another matter. He had played counter-guerrilla against the VC, going behind the lines to do to them what they were doing to American troops. "We got paid for bringing 'em back dead or alive," says Gritz. "We laid mines like sowing seeds. Among my greatest satisfactions in life other than [sex] was hearing the boom in the night. I'd turn over in my hammock after a boom and chuckle, 'Got another one.'"

"Some day you get the bear and someday he gets you. Some wait for things to happen, others wonder what happened; guerrillas make things happen. I say, 'Lead, follow or get out of the way.'"

Yet Gritz was always puzzled about one thing: why some live and some die. After Vietnam, he says he figured it out.

"Given a choice between the road to life and the road to death, you survive by choosing the road to death. That way, if you meet the enemy and he's preoccupied with the desire to live, you'll be able to kill him. That's the secret for some of us; others are just damned lucky."

On the warrior's path, Gritz met his third wife, Claudia, a stunning brunet, in an Arlington, Virginia, karate studio when he worked as a Pentagon staffer. She has a black belt, too. Two sons have followed him into the Army, one as a Green Beret, the other as a paratrooper. Another son and daughter practice karate poolside at home in Los Angeles.

"I have a perfect life, why mess it up," says Gritz. "The finger is on us. It may be the opportunity to do one selfless thing in life that makes your whole life worthwhile. If we don't do this, who will?"